



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

MUNICIPAL REGISTRATION LEGISLATION.

BY CHARLES V. CHAPIN, M.D., SUPERINTENDENT OF HEALTH,
PROVIDENCE, R.I.

Dr. Wilbur has given me the opportunity of examining the ordinances and other local regulations relating to the registration of vital statistics which his department has recently collected. These ordinances were from fifty-six cities in twenty-five States.

While many of the American colonies made very early efforts to secure a registration of births, marriages, and deaths, it was done for legal purposes, such as the identification of the individual and to assist in the transfer and inheritance of property, there was no intent to secure data for purely statistical purposes. In this early registration the colonies took the lead, the laws were generally those of the colonial assemblies, and local regulations are only occasionally found.

It was different with the beginnings of registration intended for scientific rather than legal purposes. The collection of vital statistics received its first impetus in the towns, where the registration of deaths was desired for sanitary ends. Most sanitary reforms have been the result of startling outbreaks of disease, and the registration of vital statistics which, among many other uses, is of very great sanitary importance, has had a similar origin. The outbreaks of yellow fever, small-pox, and other diseases in the early part of the nineteenth century were doubtless the cause of the demand for the registration of deaths, and, as the cities were the chief sufferers in these outbreaks, it happened that they, rather than the States, were the first to adopt registration. I have not had an opportunity to give personal study to this historical aspect of the subject, but, according to Dr. Edward Jarvis,* New York, began to publish mortality statistics in 1804, Boston in 1813, Philadelphia in 1825, Charleston in 1834, Baltimore in 1836, and Providence in 1841, and Dr. Edward H. Barton,† writing in 1849, says that Norfolk, Savannah, Mobile, and Natchez had provided for the registration of deaths. In none of the States in which these cities are situated was State registration provided for until long after the cities had set the example, and several of the States have not as yet seen fit to do so.

* "Hygiene in America," Bowditch, 1877, p. 172.

† Report of the Sanitary Commission of Massachusetts, 1850, p. 413.

Louisiana was perhaps an exception, as a general registration law was passed in 1811,* but it was never properly executed, and Massachusetts was the first State that really secured a fair registration throughout the State, and that was many years after there had been registration in Boston. But conditions have changed, and at the beginning of the twentieth century we find the State leading in this work. While it is true enough that some cities in non-registration States do excellent work in recording births, marriages, and deaths, it is also true that many of the State laws recently enacted are exceedingly full and comprehensive, prepared with great care, and far better designed to secure good work than are most of the municipal regulations. Much of this advance is no doubt due to the influence of the Federal government in encouraging and assisting in the extension of the registration area, and the excellence of recent registration legislation is the result of the high standard set by the present director of the Vital Statistics Division of the Census Bureau. Hence it is not surprising that but few suggestions can be found in local regulations, and that their best provisions are taken from the recent State laws. We must look to the latter for guidance: the former are of historical interest chiefly.

New York has for a good many years had very good registration, for, although the State law is a comparatively simple one, it requires the return of births and marriages within thirty days, the filing of death returns, and the issuance of a permit before a body may be removed or buried, and this law has been intelligently enforced by the State Department of Health. In none of the cities in New York whose local regulations were examined were found any very valuable additions to the State law, the provisions of which were more or less closely followed by the local regulations. Several of the cities limit the time for making returns to ten or seven days, and in one city the limit for still-births is three days instead of the thirty of the statute. Several provide for the registration of physicians, midwives, and clergymen; one or two require that burial permits shall be returned by sextons and transportation companies; others require a local permit for the burial of bodies brought into the city. One city requires that returns shall be in ink, and in Yonkers the physician or midwife is to leave a blank with the parent for a return of the name of the child. But in the non-registration States of Pennsylvania and Ohio, with the exception of Philadelphia and Cleveland, most of the cities have continued to work under very meagre registration ordinances.

On the other hand there have very recently been some excellent local registration ordinances. Thus Kansas City, Kan., in the early

* Report of the Sanitary Commission of Massachusetts, 1850, p. 411.

part of the present year adopted a well-planned scheme for registering births and deaths.

But, if we can judge fairly from the local legislation examined (and I think we can), it would appear that, on the whole, local regulations are not as complete or as well thought out as most of the recent State laws, and only in rare instances equal the latter, or contain any new and important provisions. Nevertheless, many cities with very scanty legislation have managed to secure excellent registration. Thus, for example, in my own city burial permits were not required until 1864, yet for many years previous, under my predecessor, Dr. Snow, our records of deaths were equalled by few cities. We are forced to the conclusion that, while good registration laws are desirable, it is equally, if not more important, to secure efficient registration officers. If a registration law secures the appointment of good officials, the battle is more than half won.

An examination of the ordinances of the fifty-six cities shows that in all but eight the work of registration is confided to the health officials. This has always seemed to me by far the best plan for cities, and this appears to have been the general opinion. The interest which health officials have in vital statistics, the use which they make of them, and the scientific training which they *ought* to have, should make them something more than mere mechanical collectors and tabulators. In six cities the city clerk, and in one the city recorder, is the registrar.

It is noticeable that twenty-three of the fifty-six cities provide for the registration of marriages by the registrar of births and deaths, in each instance the health official. This seems to be characteristic of local rather than State registration, for in only nineteen of forty-two States are health officials made custodians of marriage records,—a much lower percentage. It seems to the writer very desirable that births, deaths, and marriages should all be recorded by the same officer.

In all but four, and these are unimportant cities, the necessary requirement for the accurate registration of deaths, a permit before burial, is in force. Only nine cities specifically require a permit for bodies brought from other places, though in several others the rules could be so interpreted. Only the very latest rules attempt to designate the duties of the family, the undertaker, and the physician in the preparation of the death certificate, as they are prescribed in modern State laws, but a number of cities do direct that the physician shall prepare or sign the certificate in a specified time. Usually, it is in twenty-four hours, but it is twelve in Raleigh, thirty in Knoxville, thirty-six in New York City and Youngstown, O., forty-seven in Augusta, Ga., and six days in Columbus, Ga. (Burial permits are not required in the latter city.) In three cities the undertaker must obtain the permit

twenty-four hours before burial, and in one city twelve hours before. Fifteen cities provide that sextons and transportation companies shall return all permits to the registrar, thus securing an important check on the returns. Most of the cities make no provision for a certificate for a death which occurs without the attendance of a physician, but about a dozen refer the case to the health officer, and in Mobile it is sent to the coroner, as of course it is in other cities when there is a suspicion of violence. Several cities make the next of kin or the householder equally responsible with the physician for the reporting of a death, or in one or two instances make them responsible only when there is no physician. Only a very few cities make any attempt to secure accuracy in the statement of causes, to specify the data to be reported, the form of the return, or the character of ink or paper, and there are very few specifications for the records. Among unusual provisions may be mentioned that of Mobile, that paupers shall be so designated on the returns, and that of Denver and Cleveland, that two certificates shall be furnished, one of which, properly indorsed, is to be used as a burial permit, In Nashville, if a body is illegally buried, the health officer may order its removal within twenty-four hours.

Nearly all of the ordinances examined provide for the registration of births as well as of deaths and doubtless in some of the others such registration is otherwise provided for. In all of the cities having such provisions the records are to be obtained by reports from physicians and others: in none of them is enumeration provided for either as a primary means of obtaining records or for a check. In every instance the physician or midwife in attendance at the birth is made responsible for the return, and in many instances the parents, next of kin, or relative present, has an equal responsibility, though occasionally the parent is only responsible when the physician fails to make the return. In one city the physician is to leave a birth return with the parent. Very many of the ordinances provide a time limit in which the return shall be made. In four cities it is within one day; in one city, two days; in one, three days; in one, five days; in two, six days; in five, seven days; in four, ten days; in six, thirty days. One city requires that the returns shall be made weekly, another on the first Monday succeeding the birth; two require reports to be made monthly; one on the first of the month, one in the first week of the month, one on the tenth of the month, and one in the first ten days of each quarter. Two cities require the physician to leave a blank with the parent on which the name of the child shall later be returned, if it is unnamed at the time the physician's report is sent in. In Kansas City, when the child is not named, the recording officer is to give the person reporting the birth a blank on which the name is to be reported later.

Many of the cities require physicians, midwives, and clergymen to

keep a registrar of all deaths, births, and marriages at which they officiate, and doubtless the same thing is done without legislation, as in Rhode Island, where birth blanks furnished with stubs and bound in a book are given the physicians and midwives. Many cities have the excellent provision that physicians, midwives, and clergymen shall register their names and addresses with the recording officer.

While local regulations are thus seen to be generally quite meagre, it is doubtless a fact that in many of the cities the registration is excellent because of the interest taken in it by the registrars. Many minor matters, which nevertheless are important, and which are provided for in the more comprehensive State laws, are in these cities equally well attended to by the local registrars, and office rules and customs, under such men, take the place of specific registration.

LIST OF CITIES WHOSE ORDINANCES WERE EXAMINED.

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| Alabama | Mobile | New Jersey | Hudson |
| Arkansas | Fort Smith | | Montclair |
| Colorado | Denver | | Morristown |
| Delaware | Wilmington | | Paterson |
| Georgia | Augusta | New York | Albany |
| | Brunswick | | Buffalo |
| | Columbus | | Dunkirk |
| | Macon | | Newburg |
| Florida | Jacksonville | | Rochester |
| Illinois | Belleville | | New York City |
| | Chicago | | Rome |
| | Elgin | | Utica |
| | Mattoon | | Yonkers |
| Iowa | Dubuque | North Carolina | New Berne |
| Kansas | Kansas City | | Greensboro |
| Kentucky | Lexington | | Raleigh |
| | Louisville | Ohio | Cincinnati |
| Louisiana | Baton Rouge | | Cleveland |
| | New Orleans | | Youngstown |
| Maryland | Baltimore | Pennsylvania | Johnstown |
| Massachusetts | Boston | | Pittsburg |
| | Fall River | | Seranton |
| Mississippi | Natchez | Rhode Island | Providence |
| Missouri | St. Louis | Tennessee | Knoxville |
| Nebraska | Lincoln | | Nashville |
| | Omaha | Washington | Spokane |
| New Hampshire | Dover | | Walla Walla |
| | Manchester | | Tacoma |